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CHAPTER XII

THE PURSUIT OF HEALTH

Anatomical conceptions in relation to the science of drugs and of healing—cardinal categories of the causation of disease—training for the medical profession—divinatory dice as a method of diagnosis.

Lovedu therapy is linked, on the one hand with law, and on the other with medicine, magic, witchcraft, sorcery, and religion, but it is more closely interwoven with these last than with the first. If disease and death are the main objective of witchcraft and sorcery, disease is also the occasion of most religious rites, medicine the means of restoring the health of the human body and law the guarantee of the well-being of the social organism. Law and medicine are both largely concerned with the results of dissension between men. Open strife, which leads to social evils, is examined by the *khoro* and resolved under the guidance of its wisdom; secret malice, which causes death and disease, is diagnosed by the bones and treated by the doctor; but for the detection of the deeds of darkness the *khoro* calls in the aid of the doctor. The *khoro* relies upon public discussion and its genius effects contact and reconciliation between one litigant and another, while the doctor uses private divination and his art inspires the consultant with confidence against his secret enemy. The social psychology of the one is the counterpart of the psycho-therapy of the other. But we must not think of them as essentially different worlds, the one primarily natural and the other primarily supernatural. The medico-magico-religious is to the Lovedu rather a tangible world of mundane arrangements and subject to 'natural' forces than a cosmos, inscrutable in its configuration and governed by 'supernatural' destinies. In truth, Lovedu healing is based to some extent upon observed relations between cause and effect though more largely upon practices and beliefs which, though they will not stand the tests of our science, constitute the psychological therapy of the society. We are far too apt to discount the value of their empirical body of knowledge, instead of using it to construct a sound scientific approach to medicine. We can also do better than scorn as superstitious absurdities those indispensable techniques of medicine which, because our medical profession takes little account of them, enable the charlatan and quack to flourish among us.

To understand Lovedu conceptions of the causation of disease, we must orientate ourselves from their knowledge of human anatomy. It is indeed very meagre. All they know has been gleaned indirectly from the slaughter of cattle and goats, for they practise neither embalming nor dissection of corpses. As a result, though they have names for all the more important organs of the body, they are not always sure of their correct location. Nor have they much idea of physiological function. They know that the stomach and intestines are digestive organs and that the bladder contains urine, but lungs and the diaphragm are vaguely connected with breathing. The womb, ovaries, and testicles are definitely reproductive organs, but in medical practice this function is obscured by the role of an

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[827] internal snake believed to be intimately bound up with fecundity and
842 childbirth. Every one is said to have a snake in his stomach. It is not a
real snake, yet it is conceived of as having a head and of being able to
763 crawl up to a man's neck (causing what we call indigestion) and running
back again when he coughs. When a person has stomach-ache it is often
said, 'The snake is biting,' while dysentery is referred to as 'red' or
'white snake', according to the stage of the disease. The most important
function of this snake, and one that forms a common subject of conversa-
842 tion in connection with barrenness, is, however, its reproductive one. It is
believed that semen comes from a man's snake; if his snake is 'no good',
a child will not be born. The snake of a woman is sometimes identified
with the womb and for conception it is necessary that this snake should
accept the semen. There are two possibilities which prevent conception:
either the snake's head may be wrongly oriented or it may catch up the
semen, but spit it out again. In the first case the remedy is to 'turn
round' its head by medical treatment, in which very often the womb of a
scapegoat is used. In the second case, since the snake rejects the semen
unless the bloods of husband and wife agree and the snake of the man
may be as much at fault as that of the woman, it is usual to include both
husband and wife in treatment for barrenness. If six to nine months
elapse after marriage without conception having taken place, steps are at
once taken to set the matter right.

826 Though the Lovedu have no knowledge of the circulation of the blood,
753 they assign to it properties which lie at the basis of their medical theory.
Blood is so generally believed to be the root of most ills that a Native
describing his symptoms always says, 'I am pierced by blood.' Rheuma-
tism, stiffness after exercise, a pain or swelling in any part of the body,
is attributed to blood that has collected there or blood which is 'boiling',
making the body hot and feverish. Swellings of all kinds, including
goitre, are therefore always cupped to get rid of surplus blood, and blood-
letting as a cure for headache and other ills is as popular with the Lovedu
as it was in Europe not so long ago. The beating of the heart is not
827 believed to be continuous: it is associated with sudden fright and with
illness; but, though it is known that often the heart beats loudly when one
is not ill, they have no idea why it should do so. Veins contain blood, but
go by the same name as sinews and muscles, all of which are believed to
give strength to the body. Occasionally, though infrequently, individuals
are to be found who have other ideas. Thus David, a Christian who has
often worked in towns and has a mind of his own, has his own theory as
to the function of the heart, a deduction from his observations on dying
fowls. He believes that the heart beats, not to circulate, but to exclude
the blood, and the moment the heart stops beating the blood enters it,
causing death to the fowl or person.

753 A considerable list of terms for different diseases indicates that distinc-
tions are recognized, but it is easy to be misled into believing that the
Natives' knowledge is greater than it really is. Some terms are peculiarly
Native without any corresponding category among us, but many, like small-
pox, measles, mumps, fever, consumption, migraine, syphilis, epilepsy,
show appreciation of causes or symptoms which fit into our scheme of

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for a really weak patient. Sprinkling and *hu hata*, combined very often with other treatments, are also used alone. When there is an epidemic of coughing or dysentery, it is said 'a wind has come' and a doctor is called to sprinkle the people to ward it off. *Hu hata*, pressing a counter-irritant to the affected part, is used for toothache, when large pieces of heated bark are held to the cheek; for bruises, which are treated by the application of hot boiled leaves of certain trees; after childbirth, when hot porridge placed in a small flat basket is pressed daily to the stomach to ward off pains, and for many other purposes. But the hot poultice or emollient is not known.

Characteristically, the above-mentioned treatments are used both on occasions where they might be of real therapeutic value and for purifications and strengthenings where they could not. The principle of inoculation, which immunises in diseases such as smallpox, is widely applied to effect cures and to further magical ends with which an empirical relation in our sense is wholly obscure. The relation must be sought, not in the objective link between cause and effect as we see it, but in the Lovedu conceptions of disease, their causes and symptoms, and in the cultural pattern of the methods by which evil may be cast out or symbolically laid upon a scapegoat. This is by no means as foreign to European thought as might at first be supposed, being used to this day among the more backward peasants both in Europe and in South Africa. A cure for headache among the Lovedu is to tie a piece of medicated string or sinew round the head for a day, after which it is cut and allowed to fall with the evil it has absorbed into a hole. To cure gout you scarify the leg to insert medicine, wiping off the blood with the leaves of a growing *mufagola* bush (*Euclea sp.*) to leave the disease on it. The frog is a common scapegoat. We once witnessed how, in the case of pulsating fontanelle of a baby, considered to be a grave danger, some of the medicine inserted into the scarifications, made around the throbbing spot and on other parts of the body, was placed on a green-and-white frog. The frog was stood on the fontanelle, where it puffed itself up by rhythmic inhalations not unlike the beating of the fontanelle and finally, as a scapefrog, to which the evil had been transmitted, it was taken back to the river. One method of curing convulsions is to shave the hair in two 'paths' which cross in the centre of the child's head and to make a bark cockroach, smeared with medicine, run along each path till it drops off. In curing barrenness and in initiation into the cult of possession, a goat, after being made to lie beside the patient or having its nostrils blown into, is killed and used in the treatment.

Lovedu medicines appear to us to be a jumble of science and magic. Fully 80 per cent. are of vegetable origin. There is hardly a plant in that rich lowveld vegetation which is not used in the pharmacopoeia of some herbalist or doctor and it is significant that new plants are constantly tried out. The pattern of supposed relations that are believed to exist between symptoms and diseases, of the unscientific analogies which we call sympathetic magic, and the use of roots and barks more frequently than leaves or flowers and fruits, limits the value of this testing out of medicines. Nevertheless, many drugs have effects which either obscure or